



# Harris County: *Marching Toward a Better Future*

July 2020

Judge Hidalgo's top priority is to advance ambitious initiatives that improve the lives of all residents in Harris County. Since January, the County Judge's Office has taken bold, thoughtful action to improve flood control, reform our criminal justice system, and bring transparency, accountability, and efficiency to your government. Key accomplishments to date include:

## Opening the Doors to County Government

- **Held the County's first-ever open transition process** with seven town hall meetings across Harris County and a survey that brought together 200+ community organizations and received 11,000 responses. The county is already acting on the many recommendations received from residents, including work to support the county's first-ever affordable housing plan, reforms to the juvenile justice system, and systems like the 3-1-1 line that residents said needed to exist so that they could more easily connect with government.
- **Ensuring County business is done out in the open.** Commissioners Court meetings are now in-depth, dynamic conversations routinely attended by community members rather than a brief formality.
- **Made voting easier by allowing residents to vote anywhere on election day.** The County has also expanded early voting hours and locations, including increased access for students with early voting polls opened at the University of Houston and Texas Southern University.
- **Directed the county to create a 3-1-1 system** to make County services easier to reach.
- **Making sure Harris County is counted when it comes to the 2020 Census.** The County has committed a historic \$3.4 million dollars to Census efforts and launched our first-ever Houston-Harris County Complete Count Committee to ensure we receive our fair share of federal dollars.
- **Launched Harris Thrives, an initiative to execute a faster, fairer, and smarter flood control policy.** As part of this commitment, the County Judge's office is sharing real-time information on construction progress for flood bond projects, including how and where dollars are being spent at [HarrisThrives.org](https://HarrisThrives.org).
- **Creating a better method to invest in public infrastructure.** In coordination with County Departments, Harris County is improving the process through which investments are determined for capital improvement projects. Moving forward, the County will work in tandem with the communities they serve to gather input on where to invest and provide user-friendly information on where taxpayer dollars are being spent.
- Supported launch of an anonymous reporting system to help **identify fraud, waste or abuse in county government.** The hotline, accessible 24/7 via phone or online, allows individuals to report suspicious activity such excessive or improper use of county assets.

- Created a commission to advise the county on how to **protect and celebrate African American history and culture** in Harris County.
- Allocated \$12 million to **significantly expand vote by mail** to ensure safe and accessible voting for seniors and residents impacted by COVID-19.
- **Launched reform of the budget process** and budget department to focus on performance-based budgeting and evaluate programs based on best-practices informed outcomes.

## Building a Culture of Resilience

- **Sped the delivery of flood bond projects** by allocating local funds to jump-start construction instead of waiting for federal match dollars. Out of more than 250 flood bond projects, more than half are already approved. Additionally, drainage improvement projects have been fast-tracked for the 105 subdivisions that were hard-hit by Hurricane Harvey and flooded due to poor drainage infrastructure.
- **Improving fairness by removing politics and financial influence from decision making on flood control projects.** The County Judge's office implemented a "worst first" model to inform which flood control bond projects to prioritize. While all bond projects will be completed, the County has begun using the Social Vulnerability Index developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to allow the county to prioritize areas that are particularly prone to disasters and economic loss.
- **Working to ensure that science — not politics — forms the foundation of improving resiliency.** From experimenting with floating wetlands to investing in technology to improve our flood warning system to make sure families know their true flood risk, the county is moving forward to lead the nation on how to protect communities from catastrophic flooding.
- **Acknowledging the reality of climate change,** the County has begun using the latest science from "Atlas-14," a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration rain model that ensures decisions we make on flood control measures are based on more accurate estimates of future flooding rather than what has happened in the past.
- **Passed the most stringent flood detention requirements possible** so that new development doesn't flood people downstream. Additionally, the County has streamlined the enforcement of floodplain regulations by allowing the County Attorney's office to pursue violators of floodplain regulations without Court approval.
- **Led successful response to Tropical Storm Imelda.** The County stood up Local Recovery Centers 25 days before Federal disaster assistance center arrived to provide key resources for survivors. Judge Hidalgo also lead the charge to secure Federal recovery dollars from FEMA. To date, FEMA has provided over \$8 million for Imelda survivors. Additionally, Judge Hidalgo secured access to low-interest federal disaster loans for the survivors of the Kingwood floods in May by working in partnership with Fort Bend County, the State of Texas, and the U.S. Small Business Administration.
- **Launched the Imelda Assistance Fund** in partnership with Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner. To date, the fund has raised over \$500,000 in donations and commitments to provide additional resources for survivors.

- **Commissioned an independent review of our emergency response systems** to continuously improve, identify and fill gaps when it comes to responding to future disasters. In response to this review, Judge Hidalgo has directed agencies to implement improvements, including improved air monitoring and information sharing.
- **Required all cities and municipalities in Harris County to meet more stringent floodplain development standards.** The policy change requires all 34 cities to adopt stricter rules as a condition of receiving \$2.5 billion in County flood bond funding.

## Making Harris County a Better Place to Live and Work Everyone

- **Reformed environmental protection, monitoring, and enforcement.** The County has allocated over \$11 million to build a state-of-the-art air monitoring network, increased the size of the pollution control department by over 50%, and added resources for HazMat First Responders. The actions taken thus far represent the most significant enhancement of County environmental protections in at least 30 years.
- **Passed common-sense gun safety measures.** Despite continued roadblocks at the Federal and State level, the County has taken action to expand programs designed to keep weapons away from domestic violence abusers, expedite checks to keep gun dealers from unknowingly selling to people convicted of crimes, and encourage the use of gun locks to keep guns from the hands of children. The County has also established a task force on violence and injury prevention that will study gun violence.
- **Fought for better transit options.** Recognizing the need for innovative transit-oriented solutions instead of just wider highways, Judge Hidalgo fought to address community concerns about the widening of I-45, and will work with METRO to implement the new METRONext bond initiative. Additionally, the County is performing a first-ever countywide mobility needs assessment to ensure that future transportation development is coordinated, multimodal, and serves the needs of all Harris County residents.
- **Stood up against the Trump administration's effort to instill fear in our immigrant communities.** Judge Hidalgo has worked to fight against family separation policies, planned immigration raids in the County, and the inclusion of a citizenship question on the 2020 Census. Additionally, the County filed a successful amicus brief against the Federal Government's proposed "public charge rule" designed to threaten safety net services for immigrants and which would also overburden our county safety net systems.
- **Created a new, stand-alone Veterans Services Department.** The County doubled the budget for the Department and is collaborating with local organizations to ensure our veterans and their families receive the programs and services they have earned through service to our country.
- **Created a new, stand-alone Office of Economic Opportunity.** The department will work across government departments to advance the long-term workforce and economic growth of our region and address the growing problem of income inequality. As part of this effort, the County has commissioned the first-ever study to advise how to better support minority owned Minority/Women-owned business enterprises.

- **Launched a revamped ReadyHarris.org**, the County's flagship tool to inform residents on what to do before, during, and after disasters. The new site now includes user-friendly information on how residents can prepare for events and real-time alerts and information - like a live air monitoring map when needed - on what is happening to protect residents.
- **Raised the County minimum wage to \$15 an hour for employees and certain construction contract workers.** The County has also passed a more inclusive nondiscrimination policy, including sexual orientation and gender identity as protected classes.
- **Requiring those who do business with the County to support and protect workers.** The County is establishing criteria for evaluating safety records for workers when considering awards for construction contracts.
- **Expanded "Tow and Go" across Harris County to reduce** traffic congestion and secondary crashes by removing stalled vehicles from freeways for no cost to the driver. The service expanded from 175 miles of coverage to 245 miles of coverage through most of Harris County, including the unincorporated areas.
- **Established an Immigrant Legal Services fund** to inject fairness into our judicial system by providing immigrant families who cannot afford a lawyer with representation and legal services to ensure they are better prepared to navigate U.S. law and avoid deportation when warranted.
- **Reformed the way the county allocates transportation dollars** by replacing the outmoded ad hoc precinct-by-precinct system with a comprehensive county-wide approach intended to ensure better regional planning, effectiveness and transparency.
- **Published report on contracting disparities in Harris County** that showed profound disadvantages in county contracting for minority and women-owned firms. Economic Opportunity Department being created in part to address those issues.

## Supporting A Smarter, Fairer Criminal Justice System

- **Fixing our broken cash-bail system.** By taking action to settle an expensive, three-year old lawsuit under which federal courts had deemed the County's bail system unconstitutional, the County eliminated practices that often made wealth the sole basis for how someone accused of a misdemeanor crime was treated. The County's work to protect the constitutional rights of defendants while protecting public safety is now recognized as a national model for other communities facing unfair bail practices.
- **Increased funding for the Public Defender's Office.** The budding office, first established in 2015, received a 91% increase in funding this year. It can now represent around 20% of the County's indigent criminal defendant population, significantly enhancing fair representation within our judicial system and moving us toward the best practice of a robust public defender's office that represents the majority of indigent criminal defendants.
- **Adopted a Managed Assigned Counsel Program for indigent defense.** The Court approved the adoption of this new indigent defense delivery model in our County Criminal Courts at Law. It will

serve to oversee and enhance the independence, quality, and accountability of attorney appointments for indigent misdemeanor arrestees.

- **Stopped the construction of a new juvenile detention facility.** Instead of focusing resources on mass incarceration, the County is working to direct funds at evidence-based criminal justice reforms.
- **Established the Justice Administration Department.** The new department coordinates and serves as the hub for criminal justice reform in Harris County. Just three weeks after opening, it is already working to re-envision our Criminal Justice Coordinating Council as a vehicle for collaboration in a traditionally siloed system. It will also oversee implementation of misdemeanor bail reform and prioritize collection and analysis of criminal justice data to find ways to address inequities, reduce recidivism, lower crime, and save taxpayer dollars.
- **Passed package of criminal justice reform measures in the wake of the killing of George Floyd,** including steps to create independent civilian oversight of police, humane use-of-force policies, the establishment of a violence interruption program, and public disclosure of use of force data and video footage. Additionally, the county is driving toward assigning at least 50% of indigent cases to public defenders within the next two years and is undergoing a deep, community-centered, examination of budgeting practices in the criminal justice system.

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